



June 2015

Volume 11, Number 6

Spotlight On... Effective Instruction to Improve Writing

In 2007, the Carnegie Corporation published [*Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School*](#) (Graham and Perin, 2007). “This report identifies 11 elements of current writing instruction found to be effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. It is important to note that all of the elements are supported by rigorous research, but that even when used together, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum” (Graham and Perin, 2007:4). The report rings the alarm bell warning of the consequences of not developing effective writing, such as not being ready to enter higher education or the work place if writing skills are weak.

As we work to develop our system of demonstrating proficiency of Maine’s learning standards, we can look to *Writing Next* (WN) for effective elements of writing instruction. In the [April 2015](#) issue of *Literacy Links*, we highlighted one of those 11 strategies, using model texts (WN Strategy #10). We presented Inquiry Activities (WN Strategy #8) and Writing for Content Learning (WN Strategy #11) with our issue reflecting on the Writing for Understanding model ([August 2014](#)). We presented the Process Writing Approach (WN Strategy #9) with an exploration of organizing, editing, and revising ([October 2014](#), [December 2014](#) and [February 2015](#)). In this issue, we explore how explicitly and systematically teaching students how to Summarize Texts (WN Strategy #2) helps to improve both reading and writing outcomes. We will also look at the power of Sentence Combining (WN Strategy #6) to teach students how to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.

Meaningful Writing: Summarizing Texts

Examining Maine’s English language arts standards, the importance of summarizing appears across the strands of reading, writing and listening and speaking. Reading standard #2 requires students retell a story at the earliest grades, then summarize the text, and by grade 6, summarize texts objectively. Reading standard #9 requires students to integrate information from multiple texts to write knowledgeably, another example of summarizing. Writing standard #8 focuses on students’ ability to summarize information collected from various sources. Listening and speaking standard #3

Today was good.
Today was fun.
Tomorrow is another one.

~Dr. Suess



Fun is good.

~Dr. Suess

emphasizes the ability to summarize information presented through auditory means. The presence of summarizing across the strands underscores the critical importance of helping students identify and integrate main ideas and supporting details from various sources to accurately convey information and present arguments.

What are the benefits of learning to write a good summary?

- Learning to summarize provides a quick check of comprehension.
- Summaries help organize ideas for later use.
- A summary can suggest a method of organizing information in a full write.

Meaningful Writing: Combining Sentences

The foundations of skillful writing begin with crafting coherent sentences. Students master the ability to string together words and phrases to express complete thoughts with correct grammar and mechanics. As students mature, sophistication of writing is expected and often stipulated in rubrics. Creating the occasional complex sentence to enhance a paper or make a stronger point is a great writing strategy and provides evidence of ability to write with sophistication. Additionally, students will struggle with the works of authors like William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren if they can't navigate their way through complex sentences. Remember to use strong model texts to help students study sophisticated sentence structures and teach them how to deconstruct complex sentences as a scaffold to constructing complex sentences themselves.

What are the benefits of learning to combine sentences?

- Students learn how to effectively vary sentence structures within their writing to keep the reader's interest.
- Sentence combining supports students' understanding of the relationship between ideas contained within sentences.
- Complex thinking and reasoning is supported by sentence combining instruction.

There are a number of approaches to teaching summarizing and sentence combining. Check out the **Online Resources** and **Professional Texts** sections below for ideas.

Online Resources

The following online resources provide instructional resources for teaching summarizing.

[West Virginia Strategy Bank](#)

The West Virginia Department of Education has developed a page of resources for a variety of summarization techniques. You will



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To explore potential training sessions that may be of interest, be sure to check our extensive list of professional development offerings at

www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/



find graphic organizers for strategies such as Think-Pair-Share and Somebody-Wanted-But-So as well as links to web-based supports.

[Reading Rockets Summarizing](#)

The Reading Rockets site includes a bank of resources for teaching summarizing to elementary level students.

[What's the Gist?](#)

This link is to an article by Fisher, Frey and Hernandez that explains how to use the Gist strategy for teaching adolescent students how to summarize.

The following online resources provide instructional resources for teaching sentence combining.

[Reading Rockets Sentence Combining](#)

This site contains examples and strategies for sentence combining that are useful for elementary educators.

[Sentence Combining: Building Skills through Reading and Writing](#)

This resource from the National Council of Teachers of English includes strategies to teach sentence combining and how to use sentence combining to teach summary writing!

Professional Texts

A number of professional texts are available to support educators in developing their repertoire of instructional strategies for writing, including:

Teaching Beginning Writers

(David Coker and Kristen Ritchey, 2015)

Summarizing, Paraphrasing and Retelling: Skills for Better Reading, Writing and Test Taking

(Emily Kissner, 2006)

Best Practices in Writing Instruction

(Steve Graham, Charles MacArthur and Jill Fitzgerald, 2007)

Inside the Writer's-Reader's Notebook: A Workshop Essential

(Linda Rief, 2007)

Teaching the Neglected "R": Rethinking Writing Instruction in Secondary Classrooms

(Thomas Newkirk and Richard Kent, 2007)



“From a little after two o’clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that – a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them.”

William Faulkner, opening sentence of *Absalom! Absalom!*
(Example for Sentence Deconstruction)

Literature for Children and Adolescents

Annually, K-8 students across Maine vote on two book honors awarded in the month of April. This year's winners are noted below with links to the websites at which information about the awards and details about how students can participate can be found.

Maine Student Book Award

The award is determined each year by participating Maine students in grades four through eight. The winning book is selected from a reading list that is compiled by the Maine State Book Award committee.

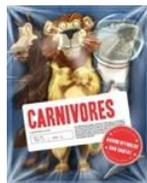
Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library By Chris Grabenstein



Chickadee Award for Picture Books

The Chickadee Award is a picture book award program for Maine children in kindergarten through fourth grade. This award is given annually to one of 10 picture books nominated by a committee of teachers, librarians and early literacy professionals.

Carnivores By Aaron Reynolds



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